

SMART COOKIES

*Four generations
find success at
Savannah's Byrd
Cookie Company,
where Lowcountry
living has never
been sweeter.*

I have loved the water ever since I was thrown in for my first swimming lesson," says Kay Byrd Curl from her redbrick house on Dutch Island, Georgia, adjacent to the island where she spent her childhood. "When you grow up with water everywhere, it gets in your blood and never leaves."

When Kay and her husband, Benny, left Savannah's Isle of Hope in 1966 for the urban grind of Atlanta, she dreamed of returning. Twenty years later, the chance to move back came when Kay's father invited the Curls to buy the business begun by her grandfather in 1924. Those were the days when the company's nutmeg cookies were packed in wooden boxes and delivered to

neighborhood grocery stores in a Model T Ford.

"I remember when Byrd was located in a garage behind my granddaddy's house," reminisces Kay, 53. "We did everything from cracking eggs to cleaning. That's when the cookies were sold two for a penny." Following World War II, Ben T. Byrd Sr. sold the company to his son, who added a new line of small gourmet cookies and cocktail snacks before selling his stake in the company to the Curls in 1988.

But a return to island living would have to wait. The Curls ran Byrd from Atlanta, where Benny, now 54, also ran a successful accounting business. He made bimonthly visits, while on-site managers oversaw Byrd's seven employees, including the Curls' 18-year-old daughter, Stephanie. With a quick mind and a penchant for numbers, the ambitious teen soon discovered the company was operating short of its potential.

With her father's blessing, she helped computerize the

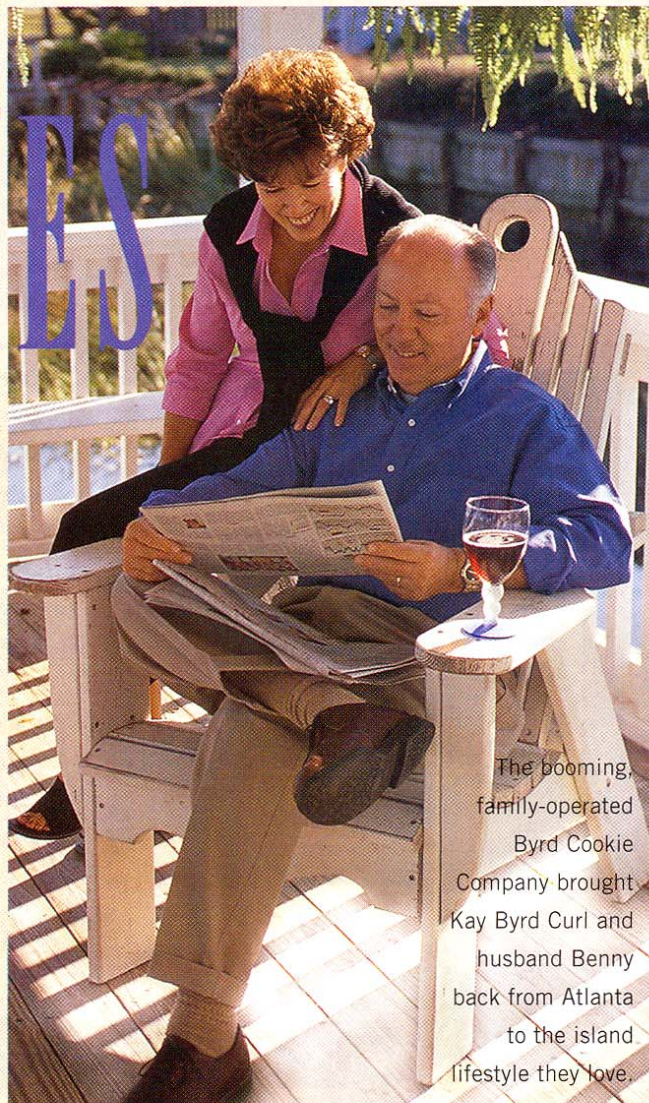
company's front office. Her first spreadsheet on overdue accounts recouped \$6,000 in the first month.

By 1993, steadily improving sales prompted Benny to sell his accounting firm and return to Savannah. "I couldn't have been happier to return to the beauty and charm of Savannah and live once again by the sea," says Kay. "And I'm especially proud to be a part of the company founded by my granddaddy."

But running a family business presents a unique set of challenges. "While difficulties are a natural part of every family, problems in a family business affect your bottom line," says Benny, CEO. "So we had to recalibrate our relationships and establish a new set of rules."

Stephanie, who was named president at age 29, agrees: "It's not easy making tough decisions that affect your own family, but it ceases being personal when the lifeblood of the company hangs in the balance. The reward is knowing that we're building something really great together."

Indeed. Sales have skyrocketed under the family's combined efforts. The company opened a new 65,000-square-foot plant and enlarged the on-site retail store, which has been a tourist attraction since opening in 1957. Kay now manages the store, along with her oldest daughter, Cynthia, 32. Her youngest child, Shawn, 27, heads the production



The booming, family-operated Byrd Cookie Company brought Kay Byrd Curl and husband Benny back from Atlanta to the island lifestyle they love.

BY JUDY ALEXANDRA DIEDWARD
PHOTOGRAPH BY J. SAVAGE GIBSON

department, where he uses his culinary talents to develop new products. Gourmet cheese biscuits have been added to the line, along with Southern-inspired condiments such as Mango Chutney, Vidalia Onion Dressing, and Peach Salsa. But the company's biggest growth came in 1989, when Benny and the bakery invented Key Lime Coolers. These tart, sugar-coated wafers were Byrd's best-seller until the introduction of the company's newest star performer—a bite-size chocolate mint cookie.

Byrd products are sold in major department stores, specialty stores, hotels, and resorts nationwide. A Web site and mail-order catalog business ships products throughout the world.

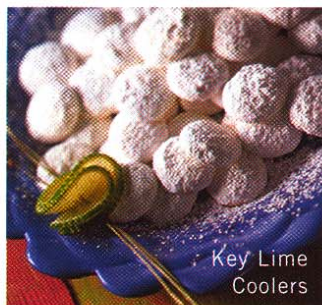
The company began a new chapter last October, when Stephanie relinquished her position as president in order to pursue business endeavors of her own. "This will be the first time that I haven't been 110 percent committed to Byrd since I was 18," says Stephanie, who looks forward to spending more time with her husband and two stepchildren. Like her parents, she and her husband are avid boaters.

And on their excursions, they will have plenty of snacks onboard. 🌴 Resources on page 261.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Members of the Curl clan offer these tips for operating a successful family business:

- Keep personal family matters outside of business hours. Things such as family picnics and birthday parties shouldn't be planned or discussed at work.



- Call family members by their first names, not Mom or Dad. This reinforces the business image and also helps nonfamily members stay focused.

- Set a weekly family meeting during business hours to maintain communications.

- Choose a family leader to handle family issues and a business leader to manage and handle business issues. Wearing two hats is virtually impossible for anyone.

- Hire a family business counselor. Professional help can be a huge support and guide whenever difficult issues arise.

- Set pay and benefits for each family member based on market value—not personal needs.

- Don't overpromote family members or provide positions of nonimportance. It would lessen their self-worth and set a precedent for automatic, unearned advancement.

- Hire brilliant nonfamily members in key positions, and treat them as you would any other family member.

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